

South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region: An Indian Perspective

Written by Arjun

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The Indian Ocean is the bedrock of global economic maritime activity in the 21st century. With the resurgence of Asia, there has been a tectonic shift of global attention from the West to the East. The waters in the Indian Ocean are rich in oil and minerals, effecting it as an energy heartland both in the supply and demand, hence slowly turning the drivers of global economy towards Asia. The region is of strategic importance as it bridges the Indian Ocean to the Pacific in the East and the Mediterranean in the West. Furthermore, this region has emerged as a vital intersection of maritime trade, connecting the countries' producers of natural resources with the consumers states. More than two thirds of global oil and over eighty percent of China's and Japan's oil is shipped through this region. Approximately fifty percent of global container shipments sail on these waters.

Keeping in consonance with the transition of the strategic sphere of influence and the paradigm shift from land to ocean, the Indian strategic community is gradually reorienting India's strategic outlook towards the maritime domain. The Indian maritime strategic community concurs that predominance and control over the Indian Ocean would potentially enable India to deliver significant impact eastward and by virtue of it, and expand its maritime footprint into the Asia-Pacific region as a counterstroke to China's aggressive maritime posture of 'String of Pearls'. The rumination of becoming a maritime power, has not translated into action adequately to one's liking, for want of capital to develop the navy and the coast-guard, since the army takes precedence over the other services in India, in all matters of security, including the distribution of the armed forces budget, delays in the induction of naval platforms and bureaucratic delays in the acquisition of the required naval capabilities. However, to overcome these unfortunate institutional oversights, the Indian Navy has been proactively engaged in developing security relations with the regional and extra-regional member countries to augment India's ability to project power in the region, while attempting to interdict China's effort of integration with the regional members.

Having criticised the sluggishness of the naval modernisation programme, there has also been a genuine effort made by the incumbent government to expedite this process, in order to meet the maritime operational requirements of the navy. The 'Make in India' initiative, is one such approach adopted by the government to meet the requisite modernisation goals of the Navy. Under this initiative several major indigenous maritime projects have been underway and are estimated to be completed within the next five to ten years, transforming India into a blue-water navy, by 2030. The indigenisation programme would also cater to self-reliance and self-sufficiency in military technology, maritime domain awareness, power projection and sea control. According to the Maritime Security Strategy published in 2016, the Indian Navy has evolved over the years to become a multi-dimensional force, with a combination of ships, boats, submarines and aircraft having strong satellite communication systems.

It is evident that the Indian Government is implementing a multi-pronged approach to develop and achieve national capabilities while simultaneously improving the supporting infrastructure for a holistic approach towards naval modernisation. It is estimated that by 2030, if all plans are met according to the expected deadlines, the Indian Navy would develop sufficient muscle to deter any form of maritime threat in the IOR and would be a force to reckon with. Nonetheless, having observed the past trends of the Indian military modernisation programmes, it is certainly going to be a tall order for the government to keep its word and to ensure the timely induction of the various naval platforms.

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Developments Under the 'Neighbourhood First' Policy

China is bulwarking its maritime assets around the fringes of the Indian peninsula to arrest the latter's influence within the subcontinent, while expanding its own sphere of influence and foothold in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Chinese clearly seem to have chalked out an action plan to contain and reduce India's growing aspiration of developing into a global power, by capitalising on its political and diplomatic oversight with its neighbours.

India's strategic geographical position and its physical size gives an undue political, economic and strategic leverage over its immediate neighbouring states, which naturally upsets the balance of power in the region in India's favour. In fact, India is the only country in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, (SAARC) to share a boundary with maximum member states in this regional intergovernmental structure, rendering India as the chief proponent and advocate of policy initiatives within the organisation. Unfortunately, India has failed to seize this opportunity due to the structural hurdles within the organisation. One such hurdle is clearly outlined in the SAARC charter that states, 'decisions at all levels shall be taken on the basis of unanimity' and 'bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from deliberations.' The unanimity clause suggests that every country within the organisation has the power to veto against any proposal, while the latter abates the opportunity of a peaceful settlement of disputes and differences between one another. This structural flaw has rendered the organisation defunct, especially given the nature of the political and uncertain volatility between India and Pakistan.

Additionally, the difference of power asymmetry and continuous bilateral conflicts between the member states, has rendered difficult the building of a unanimous consensus on any regional initiative, ensuring the ineffectiveness of the organisation. Consequently, SAARC as an intergovernmental institution has failed to provide India a platform for creating an opportunity, to help forge a strong bilateral partnership with the member states. In addition, the deteriorating India-Pakistan bilateral relation has added to India's woes, foiling any effort for a regional cooperation.

Hence, it is imperative that New Delhi envisages a new strategy to engage more productively with the regional countries by forfeiting its dependence on SAARC solely. Even before assuming official charge of the government, Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems to have acknowledged the importance of India's 'Neighbourhood' policy. In an unprecedented diplomatic initiative, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, invited all the South Asian leaders, for the swearing in ceremony and followed it up the next day, by holding bilateral talks with each one of them, vowing to reinvigorate the regional apparatus and thereby, setting tone for a new 'Neighbourhood First' policy.

Furthermore, this new diplomatic inclination shown towards South Asia, has bolstered the existing relations with most of the countries except for Pakistan. This diplomatic initiative was fortified with the Prime Minister's visit to all the regional member nations. India has witnessed a sweet and sour relation with Maldives in the past decade due to the latter's growing intimacy with China. The Yameen led government in Maldives, has asked India to withdraw its military helicopters and personnel from the Island nation, following the expiry of an agreement. President Yameen's recent proximity with Beijing, has resulted in the rise of infrastructural development projects in the country, led by the Chinese state-run firm, Beijing Urban Construction Group Construction Limited. This firm has also bagged the airport project, after Yameen's government cancelled the \$511 million deal with India's GMR Infrastructure. According to official reports, Maldives has offered a few Islands to the Chinese, for development and it is in these very Islands that the Indian personnel are deployed. Despite all these issues, Maldives and India have signed a counter-terror pact and a double tax avoidance agreement. Now, with the change of guard at the helm, it would be interesting to follow, how New Delhi deals with the new government in power.

Shifting focus to Bangladesh, the culmination of the momentous Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh and the fresh proposals in energy, connectivity and counter-terrorism have forged a stronger bond between the two nations. The termination of the Sonadia project with China, a deep seaport, south-west of Bangladesh, is a clear indication of the positive growth and development in India-Bangladesh relation. Furthermore, New Delhi has amended its strained ties with Sri Lanka during the Rajapaksa's regime and has gradually improved its relations under Gotabaya Rajapaksa's leadership. In a recent major development, India signed an agreement with Sri Lanka to offer U.S \$400 million currency swap to the latter, under the SAARC Currency Swap provision to help address the economic

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distress caused by the pandemic. This act of goodwill reflects the confidence and growing positive diplomatic discourse between the two nations.

As far as Nepal is concerned, post Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in 2014, there has been a deterioration in the bilateral ties which has culminated in the latest territorial disputes between the two states. The disputed territories include Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura which both India and Nepal claim to be theirs. This territorial contention comes at a time when Nepal has failed to address and tackle the Covid-19 situation in the country and hence, has used nationalism to cloud their pandemic mismanagement.

In regard to Afghanistan, India has always maintained a strong and abiding relation with the former due to the historical, cultural and people to people's ties. The inauguration of the Dedicated Air Cargo Corridor in 2017, between Kabul-Delhi and Kandahar-Delhi has provided a boost to the bilateral trade. India has played a crucial role in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Afghanistan, post the Taliban regime by investing in capacity building and technical cooperation in the country. India's persistence in the reconstruction and socio-economic development programme in Afghanistan has resulted in the rise of peace and prosperity in the otherwise war-torn country. This honest effort to rebuild the country has elicited in the people of Afghanistan, a goodwill towards India.

Moving on, the year 2018 commemorates the Golden Jubilee of the diplomatic establishment between India and Bhutan. Prime Minister Modi's 'Bharat to Bhutan' (B2B) vision, foregrounds the necessity for the two nations to stand for each other at all times. The two countries have shared a cordial and organic relation since Bhutan's formation as a nation. Both countries share mutual interests in various areas including security, border management, trade, hydro power and etc. In the recent Dokhlam standoff, Bhutan's firm stand to assert its status quo against China's illegal encroachment in the plateau, displays Bhutan's hardiness, honesty and commitment to protect India's security interests. Although, both countries share a commendable relation, there are a couple of issues which need to be ironed out over time. Nonetheless, India and Bhutan have shared a long history of true cordial relation and the Dokhlam standoff reaffirms Bhutan's loyalty towards India.

Unlike Bhutan, Pakistan shares a long history of hostility with India, in which there was no progress and development in the bilateral relation, since the partition in 1947. State sponsored terrorism, disputed territory and hatred towards India has halted and disrupted all efforts towards a peaceful reconciliation between the two countries. Although it is a civil government in power, the Pakistan army calls the shots, hence, New Delhi must proactively engage with its Army leadership rather than with its political head. New Delhi should open military to military dialogues along with the political and diplomatic engagements. Since day one at the office, Prime Minister Modi has been categorical with the fact that "terror and talks" cannot co-exist. Under the new leadership, New Delhi reached out to Pakistan afresh but all in vain, for it was unable to find a way forward in regard to Pakistan. However, its effort to internationally isolate its nemesis seems to have succeeded, with America withdrawing its support for the first time and revoking its annual economic and military aid to Pakistan.

The India-Pakistan dilemma cannot be solved without a long-term continuity policy and a national will. There is a need for a concerted synergy of all the state's dispositions and resources to be operational and functional on a continuous basis till the task is achieved. Until an orchestrated effort is not put into motion, it would be difficult to find a solution to the India-Pakistan predicament. Nevertheless, excluding the Pakistan dilemma, the new 'Neighbourhood First' initiative, has comforted India's influence in the region. This renewed diplomatic effort has rejuvenated the lost political and economic vision towards South Asia and has re-invented itself, as a true regional power by regaining and strengthening its relations with the South Asian nations. By doing so, it has enabled itself to protect its sphere of influence in South Asia as well as, in the Indian Ocean.

China's Strategic Interests in South Asia and the Indian Ocean

One of the primary reasons, why China is determined to control South Asia is because of its geographical position and its economic appeal in the region. South Asia is one of the most poorly economically integrated regions in the world. Intraregional trade has been inadequate and below par due to expensive transport charges, protectionist policies and regional political instability. As a result, there has been a rise in import of goods from China, making it

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the top exporter in the region; breaking into the South Asian markets with an export-led growth strategy.

According to Sithara Fernando 'China's most important maritime concerns in its relations with South Asia are oceanic trade transit points for western China, the sea lanes connecting the Straits of Hormuz and the Straits of Malacca which carry its energy imports' (Fernando, 2012). Eighty percent of China's oil consignment is shipped from the Gulf through the Strait of Malacca, hence, making the Indian Ocean and South Asia a crucial junction for its energy supply lines. India's proximity to the Strait of Malacca in the form of the Great Nicobar Island, seated at its entrance, poses a severe concern to Beijing. The Chinese leadership has taken cognisance of the importance of controlling this channel and is well aware that whosoever controls the Strait, will have leverage thereby choking China's supply line. Hence, China has recalibrated its national strategy by orienting its focus on South Asia and on the Indian Ocean. Since, its major energy supply lines and economic interests are maritime based, China has surged forward with the modernisation of its navy at a neck-breaking speed. Also, Beijing's recent focus on developing its maritime force originates from the fact that, it has shifted focus from a land-centric strategy to an ocean-centric strategy, of having permanent naval presence in the Indian Ocean to protect its vested maritime interests.

In order to achieve this, China has developed strategic partnerships with the South Asian nations as well as with East Africa, leading to the development of commercial and military naval facilities and infrastructure around the Indian peninsula. The 'Maritime Silk Route' (MSR) and the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) present a vision of interlinked ports and nodal points cutting across the Indian Ocean. To protect these domestic facilities and crucial points, the Chinese have deployed more naval muscle to fortify their maritime economic and trade interests. This course of action has allowed the Chinese naval presence to foray into the Indian Ocean which is considered to be India's backwaters. China's network of maritime activities and development of infrastructure in various countries around the subcontinent has geopolitically and geographically encircled India, leading towards the articulation of the 'String of Pearls' doctrine. This policy drives to arrest India's influence and curtail India's maritime leverage in the Indian Ocean. China naturally denies such offensive measures, however their actions and policies on ground speak otherwise.

During the last decade, Beijing has directed its efforts towards the establishment and development of port infrastructure, facilities, military and naval establishments across the Indian Ocean. China has established its first foreign military base at Djibouti. It has developed a chain of maritime ports and facilities right across the breadth of the Indian Ocean from Kenya to Malaysia. Beijing has signed agreements to develop maritime facilities in various countries around the Indian subcontinent, including Kenya, Sudan, Pakistan, Maldives, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia and Malaysia. If one connects all these countries, one can establish a chain that cordons off and lays a noose around the Indian sub-continent.

To redeem itself from this geopolitical strangulation, New Delhi seems to have found a reprisal in the form of the 'Act East' policy. This policy has enabled India to strengthen its cultural, economic and security architecture through strategic cooperation with not only the South East Asian countries but also the Asia Pacific member countries, as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to assure India's continuous influence in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean Region, New Delhi has to synchronise, coordinate and fuse both political and military policies together, to obtain the desired results. It has to use the military as a means to achieve its political ends. One cannot exist without the other. As in China's case, one can observe a harmonious coordination between the political and the military establishments. China's political and economic interests are protected and realised through military action which is evident in the 'Maritime Silk Route' and 'Belt and Road Initiative'. China's focus to modernise its Navy is testament to the political and military concordance. Hence, India should take a leaf out of China's book to counter Chinese expansionist policies while maintaining its own sphere of influence in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean Region.

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